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ABSTRACT

A study examined the United States television networks' news coverage of human rights in Central America during the administration of President Jimmy Carter to determine whether the President's hopes for greater media coverage of human rights issues were acknowledged by network newscasts. A content analysis of "Television News Index and Abstracts" was conducted for weeknight reports of the three major network newscasts. The results showed that the number of news stories related to Central America in Carter's first year was surprisingly low, given the amount of political unrest in Nicaragua and Panama. In 1978, the number of stories related to human rights increased considerably. The number of reports from the field decreased in 1979, probably due to the events in Nicaragua as American journalists tried to leave the country. By 1980, all of the NBC and CBS newscasts covering Central America referred to some aspect of human rights. The analysis showed that the number of human rights-related stories did increase during the Carter Administration, but the total amount of time allotted to Central American issues remained small. (HTH)

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NETWORK TELEVISION COVERAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA DURING THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION, 1977-1980

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NETWORK TELEVISION COVERAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

DURING THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION, 1977-1980

Any study concerned with the analysis of human rights struggles with the problem of defining the material. One author sums up the problem by saying: "The main difficulty of human rights reporting is that there is no general agreement about what should be covered and for what purpose" (Rosenblum, 1981, p. 96). Deciding whether a story in the media relates to human rights issues has usually depended upon the use of the "Big Three" terms: torture, arbitrary arrest, or summary execution" (Rosenblum, 1981, p. 193).

When human rights issues are covered by the visual medium of television, efforts must be made to interest the audience through visual material. The result is sometimes confusing and misleading for the audience, because often human rights coverage will concentrate on terrorism or violence, without any reportage of the process of the event (Larson, 1982). As television begins to play an even more important role in how the global audience perceives news, more care needs to be given to topics like human rights.

> The topics selected and excluded, the points of view accorded and denied legitimacy, and indeed the implicit concept of what is to be included in the realm of "politics" --all are definitive features of the world of TV news. The upshot of this is that over time--again the cumulative phenomenon is significant--TV news promotes certain "ways of seeing the world," and thus, of necessity, excludes other ways.
> (Dahlgren and Chakrapani, 1982, pp. 45-65)

According to a 1979 Roper report, over two-thirds of the U.S. population regard television as their principle source of news (Roper, 1980). Factors such as this contributed to the recent New World Communication Order, which cited such elements as increasing ENG and satellite technology, U.S. information flow, and the impact of news flow and the development of foreign affairs as items of importance for global communication.

The coverage of human rights presents an agenda item for the global audience. During the Presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977-1980) human rights were considered of primary importance. In an address before the General Assembly of the United Nations on March 17, 1977, Carter outlined the goals of his administration, which included co-operation with the Soviet Union on matters of nuclear arms, meeting basic human needs for the developing world and aiding them in their productive capacity, helping in the Middle East by developing mutually acceptable principles that would form a flexible framework for a just and permanent settlement, and supporting Portugal and Spain in their efforts to strengthen their democratic systems. In a global context, Mr. Carter went on to say:

> The search for peace and justice also means respect for human dignity. All the signatories of the U.N. Charter have pledged themselves to observe and to respect basic human rights. Thus, no member of the United Nations can claim that mistreatment of its citizens is solely its own business. Equally, no member can avoid its responsibilities to review and to speak when torture or unwarranted deprivation occurs in any part of the world (Public Papers of the Presidents, 1977, pp. 444-451).

Carter also stated he had recommended that the entire United Nations' Human Rights Division be moved back to New York "where its activities will be in the forefront of our attention and where the attention of the press corps can stimulate us to deal honestly with this sensitive issue (Public Papers of the Presidents, 1977, pp. 444-451).

This study examines the television network news coverage of human rights in Central America during the Carter Administration to determine whether the President's hopes for greater media coverage of human rights issues were acknowledged by network newscasts, and it attempts to determine how the medium treated material which was not only non-visual in nature, but also which influenced foreign policy. While this paper concentrates solely on the television news coverage of network evening news' treatment of human rights in Central America including Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Honduras, and Costa Rica, it does not indicate that only Central American countries were prime human rights violators. In a speech at the University of Durham in 1977, David Simpson talked of violations in every part of the world--from Chile, Argentina, Cuba, Uraguay, Soviet Union, Northern Ireland to South Africa, Ethiopia, the Middle East, Democratic Kampuchea (formerly Cambodia), the People's Republic of China, Vietnam and Indonesia. He even cited prisoners of conscience in the United States; those fighters for some sort of minority, blacks or American Indians (Simpson, 1979).

However, during the Carter Administration the violations of human rights in Latin America became a salient world issue. Kaufman writes that the "scale of repression had been much greater during the seventies than in any earlier period of the twentieth century (Simpson, 1979, p. 129). Figures from the reports of Amnesty International for Latin America revealed the number of political prisoners had begun to decline; however, this trend was accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of disappearances. For instance, in Argentina there was an estimated 2,500 political prisoners, but the number of desaparecidos (disappeared people) ranged anywhere from ten to twenty thousand; documentary evidence existed for almost all of the individual cases (Kaufman, 1982).

Kaufman also wrote about 25,000 individuals who had disappeared or were known to be victims of extra-judicial executions in Guatemala since 1966, and Simpson said that political killings in Guatemala had topped the 20,000 mark since 1966 (Simpson, 1979). A Guatemalan National Police spokesman reported that in the first ten months in 1979, figures of the killings by the Anti-Communist Secret Army were 2,252 (Kaufman, 1982). During the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, about 3,000 persons were considered desaparecidos, while in El Salvador, the survival of the civic-military junta was threatened by controversy over the demands of the whereabouts of almost four hundred cases of people who had disappeared. During its first year in power, it was unable to curtail, or else tolerated, a further 8,000 cases of political assassinations (Kaufman, 1982).

Targets for repression were even chosen according to a biological fact, such as age. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights found that the National Guard in Esteli, Ciriamba and other areas of Nicaragua shortly before the downfall of President Somoza, had repressed indiscriminately "any male youth between 14 and 21 years of age (Kaufman, 1982)."

Even complaints could constitute grounds of human rights violation. In El Salvador, people were liable to criminal prosecution and imprisonment for making complaints about human rights violations or reporting such abuses to the authorities (Simpson, 1979). The figures clearly indicate that during the Carter Administration, human rights violations were noted in Central America, however Amnesty International does not receive regular allegations of prisoners of conscience and prisoners of torture from the Republic of Costa Rica. Since 1966, Costa Rica has been a country which has enjoyed freedom from fear. It had its first fully free election in 1889 and has generally enjoyed democracy since the turn of the century. For decades it shared, along with Uruguay and Chile, the enviable distinction of sustaining democracy and a high level of civil liberties. But Chile and Uruguay and the other country which constitutes the "Southern Cone"--Argentina, have lost that distinction; the military coups in these three countries have been linked to savage repression and specific economic policies which have been pushed through to the great benefit of a minority of the population, but at a great cost to the majority (Townsend, 1979).

What Are Human Rights?

Human rights is a modern term for what has traditionally been defined as natural rights or the rights of man. Even in the twentieth century one refers to the philosopher John Locke as the authority on the subject. His two treaties, the Letter on Toleration and Two Treaties of Government, provide the theoretical justification for his declaration of the "rights to life, liberty and property" (Cranston, 1973, p. 2). The English Bill of Rights and the American Bill of Rights reflect Locke's reasoning. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen issued by the Constituent Assembly in France also follows the English and American models. It asserts that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights." Furthermore, the declaration asserts that the "purpose of all political association is the conservation of the natural and inalienable rights of man: these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression (Locke, 1690).

Other European countries followed the English model; Sweden in 1908 and Holland in 1815. They incorporated into their constitutional monarchy this concept of natural rights. Other nations copied the American model of a republic; they wrote that the preservation of men's natural rights is their raison d'etre (Cranston: 444).

When the United Nations was created after World War II, one of its foremost tasks was what Winston Churchill called "the enthronement of human rights (Cranston: 449).

On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a "common standard of achievement for all people, all nations (A Standard of Achievement, 1960:2). This constituted the first time in history that responsibility for the protection and the pursuit of human rights was formally assumed by an international body; the United Nations accepted this as a permanent obligation. When the United Nations' Commission on Human Rights was given the task of drafting such a declaration, it decided the bill should be subheaded into three distinct parts: a declaration of human rights; a covenant on human rights, and thirdly, measures of implementation. The Universal Declaration constituted part one. In 1966, the General Assembly adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with its Optional Protocol (nations which sign the protocol accept the right of petition by individuals as well as by governments) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. These covenants were "entered into force in 1976" (Draper, 1982, p. 14).

Two regional organizations have made significant contributions toward international observance of human rights. One is the Organization of American States (OAS), which adopted the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man nine months before the United Nations approved the Universal Declaration. The other organization is the Council of Europe, a pioneer in developing the machinery for the collective enforcement of human rights.

In 1950, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was adopted; this said any individual, group of individuals or a nation whose rights have been violated can file a complaint with the European Commission of Human Rights. If a settlement isn't reached, the party can appeal to the European Court of Human Rights or the Council of Europe's Committee Minister. Respect for human rights is a condition for membership (Draper, 1982).

Methodology and Limitations of the Study

As stated in the opening paragraph of this paper, defining human rights is a problematic issue. In computer searches of Dissertation Abstracts, Public Affairs Information Service Index (PAIS), Political Science Documents, Sociological Abstracts, and the Congressional Information Service (CIS), little research on the mass media and the issue of human rights was revealed. Item description words included; developing countries, Third World, press coverage, news coverage, human rights, religious freedom, or aparthied or religious liberty.

For the purpose of this study, human rights is defined as outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 3 states that "everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." In Article 4, "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude," while Article 5 states that "no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Defining human rights is paradoxical; human rights rest on universal principles

as stated by John Locke but the precise moral rights of people in some communities or countries differ from the precise moral rights of people in other communities. It is for this reason that the formulation of human rights remains ambiguous and not narrowly defined.

This study was conducted by the use of Television News Index and Abstracts, which has been tested to reveal a high degree of reliability as a source of data about international news coverage (Larson and Hardy, 1977). The description of key words in the Index include words such as torture, assassination, political assassinations, violence, disappearances, repressed or oppressed. These words are synonymous with violations of human rights in the context of this study, but the researchers did read all abstracts to determine whether the words used were contextually defined as human rights topics. For example, the word "terrorist" was sometimes used within the connotation of a human rights event, but sometimes also used for a descriptive process which related to other types of events.

The content analysis was conducted for only weeknight reports, Monday through Friday, of NBC, CBS and ABC news, by a page-by-page analysis. Weekend reports were not included because often times reports were pre-empted by sports, or because news was cancelled. In addition, weekend coverage usually consists of material gathered during the week, and put together by a staff of newspersons concerned with filling time. Many weekend reports consist of a number of issues in abbreviated form.

The term "human rights" was not an index word for the Index. Therefore, a page-by-page search ensured both contextual and complete reports. The variables considered were:

--amount of time spent on the news item

--relationship of the item to a human rights issue

--percentage of human rights-related stories to the total coverage

--number of reports filed from a field location (to estimate possible visual information)

Items such as news placement or correspondent did not figure prominently in the analysis, because of the nature of world events at the time (i.e. Iran, South Korea), and the availability of "seasoned" reporters. Similarly, blackouts of visual information and news satellites influenced the correspondents' coverage at certain times and therefore, some visual materials were not possible to categorize.

Results

It is possible to see the number of items relating to Central America by referring to the appendix (p. 20). The number of news stories relating to Central America in Carter's first year as President was surprisingly low, given the amount of political unrest in Nicaragua and Panama. All of the events covered in 1977 related to unrest in El Salvador, one of the prime violators of human

rights--but only 40% of those stories made any reference to human rights.

In 1978 the number of stories increased considerably, and so did the number of stories related to human rights. While NBC carried the fewest stories about Central America, it did cover the greatest percentage of human rights stories, and did so in a much shorter amount of air time. CBS and ABC reported almost the same number of stories (27 and 28 respectively), with the same percentage devoted to human rights (78%). The number of reports issued from the field did not indicate that any network had the potential for covering a greater number of visuals from the field than the others (NBC - 16; CBS - 15; ABC - 18).

The greatest number of stories in 1978 dealt with Nicaragua's political unrest during the Somoza Regime, the Sandinists, and political asylum given to fleeing Nicaraguans by Panama. 79% of the stories related to human rights, including such issues as Somoza's appeal to President Carter for help; Carter's foreign policy; reports by Amnesty International regarding human rights violatons; OAS arbitration; martial law; and violations of Panama and Costa Rica's borders.

Perhaps not too surprisingly, the longest individual stories in 1978 dealt with the problems of press coverage, such as the censorship of the main opposition newspaper in Nicaragua, La Prensa, the Somoza ban on foreign correspondents' access to the news

satellite, and on the human interest story about NBC producer Don Critchfield and the two cameramen who were caught in Managua during a period of political unrest. The drama of three American newsmen caught in crossfire had no visuals from the location, but provided an element of "you-are-there" reality.

In 1979 NBC surfaced as the leader in Central American coverage with 22 news stories, 19 of which related to human rights (86%). NBC also had the greatest number of stories filed from a location (13). CBS and ABC each covered the same number of stories (18), and devoted the same percentage to human rights issues (83%). However, CBS had the fewest number of stories filed from the field (7) and devoted the least amount of air time to issues in Central America (21 min. 46 sec.).

Again, the two countries primarily covered were El Salvador and Nicaragua, with the latter receiving the most coverage. And again, the number of human rights-related stories increased percentage-wise (84%).

The number of reports from the field decreased in 1979, probably due to the events in Nicaragua as Americans tried to leave the country, and due to the State Department's policies. Reports about the death of ABC reporter Bill Stewart did not command a large portion of air time from CBS or NBC, but ABC devoted portions of a total of approximately ten minutes to Stewart's murder and the human rights violations related to that event (approximately one-third of its total coverage for the year). Stewart's death also precipitated a "mass exodus" of reporters beginning in late June.

Also in 1979, Amnesty International, the Red Cross, and OAS were mentioned more frequently than in previous years. As El Salvador became more of a focus in August-September, the Human Rights Commission was covered in greater detail in nightly newscasts.

By 1980, 100% of NBC and CBS' nightly newscasts referred to some aspect of human rights when covering Central America. The emphasis changed in this year from Nicaragua to El Salvador, and the number of stories increased with NBC covering items 23 times, CBS 29, and ABC, 19 times.

Even though CBS' coverage increased significantly in terms of the number of stories (18 in 1979--29 in 1980), the number of field reports remained low (9), and the total amount of air time was not significantly improved over 1979 (1979, 21:46; 1980, 27:00). ABC's coverage dropped, not in terms of the number of stories, but in terms of air time devoted to any of the Central American countries. No material to correlate this drop in the amount of air time with Stewart's death was suggested throughout the news abstracts.

The stories about Nicaragua in 1980 primarily focused on the assassination of Somoza and Carter's policies toward the country, while the stories relating to El Salvador primarily centered around Carter's granting of aid and the discussions about military advisors. In December of that year, the bodies of

three Catholic nuns and an American social worker were found murdered, and every story aired that month discussed human rights violations and the suspension of U.S. aid to El Salvador. 98% of the stories filed in 1980 dealt with human rights.

Discussion

The results of this analysis show that a concentration of television reports during the years of the Carter Administration, with regard to Central America, focused on events in Nicaragua and El Salvador. When other countries in Central America were mentioned, the news story generally discussed how that country was coping with the violence in Nicaragua or El Salvador. Throughout the Carter Presidency, the emphasis given to human rights was brought to bear upon network coverage, with human rights issues covered increasingly throughout the years of 1977-1980, until two networks related stories to human rights events exclusively in 1980. An interesting note is supplied by the news abstract provided by CBS on December 19, 1980, in which bloodshed in Central America was linked to the election of Ronald Reagan and the fear in Managua that foreign policy would be severely changed, with human rights suffering.

The relationship of media coverage and foreign policy has been discussed by Cohen (1963) in The Press and Foreign Policy, which concentrated on print media, and more recently, by Larson

in an article titled: "International Affairs Coverage On U.S. Evening Network News, 1972-1979." Both studies state that the press acts as an observer, a participant, and a catalyst with relation to foreign policy (Larson and Hardy, 1977).

In terms of television networks' coverage of human rights-related issues in Central America as an observer, it may be possible to relate the findings of this study to the way in which the networks decide to report the stories from Central America. For example, the length of stories and the frequency of reports increased for each network when Americans were involved, such as the murder of Bill Stewart, Americans fleeing Nicaragua, or the murders of the nuns and social worker in El Salvador.

Interestingly, each network would occasionally make references to events on prior days--even though that network did not cover the story. Obviously, the networks count on the audience's getting news from sources other than their own programs.

In terms of television news acting as a participant in foreign policy, it may be possible to look at some of the methods used by the Carter Administration to see that foreign policy be made available for media coverage. As stated elsewhere in this paper, Carter wished for the U.N.'s Human Rights Division to be moved back to New York to facilitate media coverage. Likewise, Rosenblum (1981) says:

> Since the end of the Ford Administration at the insistence of Congress and President Carter, the U.S. State Department has revealed more information about human rights abuses abroad. Embassies were ordered to pay close attention to the subject and desk officers in Washington made new contacts with experts in the field. New laws required the State Department to issue reports on the condition of human rights in countries which were to receive military aid. Administration officials at times have been brutally forthright in criticising abuses giving reporters legitimate pegs to write at length on the subject (Rosenblum: 231).

While the results of this study could make no reference to the terminology used by the correspondents (due to material available from Television News Index and Abstracts), Dahlgren and Chakrapani (1982) have documented some of the ways in which the audiences' perception about news content may be influenced by reporter terminology:

> ...Somoza's position was further undermined by an embarrassing loss of support from the Carter Administration which had criticized him for human rights abuses and cut off military aid (NBC, 7/6/79).

Terms which take the pejorative approach ("embarrassing loss") contribute to the audience's understanding of the issue at hand. This becomes critical when discussing the impact of American news upon other cultures.

According to Larson (1982), "network television news fills a more important role as a catalyst in the foreign policy process than it did prior to 1963 (p. 18). One way in which tv news does

this, is through its presentation of visual material, and in this category, human rights suffered greatly. Rosenblum (1981) says: "What reporting there has been has less impact than it might because it is done with words, not news film or pictures (p. 18)." Visual material related to human rights is difficult to attain, because the subject matter itself is not particularly visual in nature. The result is that human rights violations, because of violence or terrorist activities, are made to represent human rights--and the message given to the audience becomes somewhat frayed--the reporting appears to deal with the event of violence rather than the issue at hand.

Finally, the amount of coverage given to foreign policy issues in relation to other news stories covered by the networks must be addressed. As Jeremy Tunstall writes in The Media Are American (1977), the U.S. has had enormous influence over the media's development in other countries. Likewise, the availability of ENG and satellite technology has made it possible for the visual material produced for the U.S. networks to be seen around the world. The Western approach to news coverage which concentrates on events rather than processes, has become such a controversial subject, that the New World Communication Order has cited the problem as one of global importance (Larson, 1982).

James F. Larson's analysis of network news coverage indicates that for the period of 1972-1979, the geographical area of Latin America (which he defines as all countries and territories

in the Western Hemisphere south of the United States) ranked eighth out of nine areas in terms of the amount of attention given to the region by nightly newscasts (Larson, 1982). It should also be noted however, that Larson's account is for the total number of stories, with no qualification given to special interests, such as human rights. For the period covering 1976-1979, Larson estimates that Latin America received a total of 14.1% of all coverage of international events reported by the U.S. networks. During this same time period, the networks were devoting a total of 9 minutes, 22 seconds (average) of air time to international news (Larson, 1982). Larson found that "only about 20 of the nations of the world are mentioned in more than two percent of the international news stories on each network (p. 30)." Not surprisingly, the countries covered most frequently were the USSR, Great Britain, France, China, West Germany and Japan. When developing nations were cited, they were usually engaged in some sort of conflict.

Conclusion

This study shows that the number of human rights-related stories did increase in number during the Carter Administration, but as the studies by Larson, and Dahlgren and Chakrapani indicate, the total amount of time devoted to Central American issues by the networks remains small. While television may indeed act as a catalyst for foreign policy by bringing issues to the audience, certain problems arise as television observes and participates in the newsgathering process.

Making non-visual stories visual is a problem in human rights coverage, because the only visuals available may connote violence and/or terrorist activity which could be viewed as an event rather than a process, thereby offering information to the audience, which it may or may not interpret correctly. Also, the bias for stories relating to Americans may be related to human rights, but the type of coverage may not necessarily explore the process involved.

If this study were to be continued, it would be necessary to examine the visual and audio material from the same newscasts to better interpret the correspondent's approach, and the availability of image-laden visuals. While the bias of the Western news media cannot be ignored, it could be explained with the hopes of improving coverage of non-visual material in the future.

In addition, future research needs to address the limitations of the technological methods of newsgathering and the impact of such technologies on the international news flow. It would be interesting to note what types of visual materials are sent to different cultures, and monitor the description given to them.

As television becomes more and more predominant as a major source of information for the world, more research will be needed to understand the impact of the technology, and the ways people make sense of the media.

YEAR	NETWORK	No. of News Items	No. of Field Reports	Time	No. of H.R. Items	Time	% of H.R. Items	Total for Yr.
1977	NBC	0	--	--	--			
	CBS	3	2	6:16	1	2:20	33%	
	ABC	2	--	:40	1	:30		5 stories; 2 h.r. (40%)
1978	NBC	19	16	61:08	16	39:50	84%	
	CBS	27	15	55:36	21	51:20	78%	
	ABC	28	18	63:08	22	53:50	78%	74 stories; 59 h.r. (79%)
1979	NBC	22	13	38:05	19	36:05	86%	
	CBS	18	7	21:46	15	21:16	83%	
	ABC	18	9	33:03	15	32:00	83%	58 stories; 49 h.r. (84%)
1980	NBC	23	18	36:00	23	36:00	100%	
	CBS	29	9	27:00	29	27:00	100%	
	ABC	19	5	19:33	18	19:13	94%	71 stories; 70 h.r. (98%)

NETWORK COVERAGE OF CENTRAL AMERICA, 1977-1980

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